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A NEW FORM OF CULTURE ON THE ARCTIC COAST

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The recent discovery (1939–1940) of the ruins of a very large ancient settlement at Point Hope on the north coast of Alaska has revealed a new form of Arctic coastal cultures which is highly specialized and complex even though it must have developed in the Arctic regions before the beginning of the Christian era. Its sophisticated character and its wide divergence from other prehistoric cultures in northern North America suggest that it was introduced from some center of culture advance in eastern Asia.

The ruins of the settlement at Point Hope, which we have called Ipiutak, lie on the northern shore of the Point Hope bar, a long narrow peninsula, which is no more than a sandbar reaching out into the Arctic Ocean from Cape Thompsen near the mouth of the Kukpuk River. The modern Eskimo village of Tigara is only one mile distant along the south shore of the bar at its western extremity which is approximately twenty miles from the mainland. A part of the Ipiutak ruins was discovered in the summer of 1939 by Helge Larsen, Louis Giddings and the writer during a joint expedition of The American Museum of Natural History, the Danish National Museum and the University of Alaska, but its remarkable extent and the adjoining cemetery, which contained some of the finest and most unique material, was not discovered until the second season of field research in 1940.[1] Over six hundred house ruins were charted and twenty-three of these were excavated during the two seasons' work. Test pits indicate that there are probably two hundred additional house sites and that still others have been destroyed by the sea. The cemetery is of unknown extent. We found sixty-three graves in an area approximately three-quarters of a mile long and one quarter of a mile wide east of the Ipiutak ruins; but the graves undoubtedly extend much farther east and south.

The houses are grouped in five "avenues" nearly one mile in length and in short cross blocks at right angles to the axis of the long avenues. Those excavated average approximately five meters square. Most of them have

a narrow entry way two to four meters long invariably facing toward the west. All the houses have a central hearth in which driftwood and seal oil were burned in an open fire. The structure of the houses, however, has not been determined. Some driftwood logs and poles were used in flooring and in the framework of walls and roofs, but the actual walls and roof may have been made of sod, skin or moss. Thick deposits of débris on the floors indicate that they were permanent dwellings utilized over a period of several years at least. No noticeable variation was observed in the material excavated from different houses; none was superimposed over the ruins of another; there was no large deposit of midden refuse, although some culture refuse was found about most of the houses; and the houses were apparently arranged in a particular town plan; hence we believe that the great majority of them were actually occupied contemporaneously. If this is true then we have evidence of a settlement with a population of perhaps three or four thousand persons, several times larger than any known Eskimo settlement in the Arctic.

Many of the graves were remarkably well preserved. These rectangular box-like driftwood log tombs contained one, two or three skeletons with elaborate grave furniture. The most remarkable burials were those with skulls equipped with large spool or cone-shaped ivory eyes with jet pupils, ivory mouth covers and in one case ivory nose plugs. But many graves contained sophisticated ivory carvings and implements unlike anything thus far known in the north. It is clear that the Ipiutak people buried their finest possessions with the dead and that in many cases great care was taken in the disposal of the dead, as well as in the preparation of bodies for burial.

During the two seasons we excavated approximately 4000 implements and fifty complete skeletons. Implements are made from ivory, bone, antler, flint and wood, materials used commonly by the Eskimos; but rubbed slate implements as well as clay lamps and pots, which are the most common objects in all western Eskimo deposits, are lacking. The collections as a whole may be summarized as follows: Fourteen types[2] (217 implements) are modified forms of characteristic Eskimo implements appearing in all stages of western Eskimo culture; nineteen types (1128 implements) occur in some form in Eskimo culture, but, in addition, have a wide distribution outside the Eskimo area;[3] 835 fragments of no significance in a classification; and 1850 implements which are, for the most part, peculiar to the Ipiutak culture. This last group includes 500 arrowheads made from caribou antler, the majority of which have extremely delicate flint blades set in the sides, others with small flint blades set in the points. There is also a large collection of flint implements in a variety of peculiar types and of unknown use, which represent a remarkably fine technique in flint chipping; long ivory lance heads with inset flint side blades in the style of

Maglemosean culture of North Europe; and a collection of approximately 150 fantastic ivory carvings which are difficult to classify. Some may be ornaments, but others are obviously utilitarian.

The age of this deposit can be determined by correlation with other prehistoric sites in Alaska. Fairly extensive excavations in the Bering Straits region have made it possible to define at least six stages in the development of Eskimo culture along the western Arctic coast during a period believed to be equal to the Christian era.[4] The earliest stages, those described as Okvik and Old Bering Sea[5] are characterized by distinctive styles of engraving on ivory objects with geometric patterns. This early trait of engraving objects with complex designs disappears in the later stages of western coastal Eskimo culture, although the total culture-complex, in its basic form, is not materially altered from the earliest known stage to historic times. A large number of the Ipiutak implements are also decorated with geometric patterns. These show some specific relation to the Okvik and Old Bering styles, particularly to the Okvik which is the most ancient style hitherto known in western culture. Thus we can be reasonably certain that there is some direct culture connection between the earliest known stages of Eskimo culture and that found at the Ipiutak site. But unlike the early forms of culture previously found in the Bering Straits region, that at Ipiutak contains only a small part of the traits characteristic of Eskimo culture in general. The divergent character of this culture can be summarized in the following manner: In the description of the Okvik culture in northern Bering Sea I have illustrated sixty-four significant classes of implements, all but two of which can be recognized by their function as known from historic Eskimo culture. At least ninety per cent of the sixty-four classes occur in some form in each one of the known culture stages succeeding the Okvik type, indicating that there is a well defined and homogeneous pattern of culture in the Straits region extending over a period of perhaps two millennia from Okvik to modern times. Only twenty-four of these sixty-four basic classes have been found at the Ipiutak site. Furthermore, a large part of the Ipiutak collection consists of unidentifiable implements which have no parallel in other culture forms found in the Arctic regions or elsewhere.

These factors of correlation can be interpreted in different ways. Either the people of Ipiutak were immigrants who brought a distinctive material culture into the Eskimo area, exchanging little with their neighbors, or they settled the Arctic coast prior to the advent of the familiar Arctic coast Eskimos who borrowed something at least from the earlier people. It is also possible that the Ipiutak culture represents a highly specialized local development but this seems to be the least probable explanation since so many basic elements of Eskimo culture are absent, that is, seal oil lamps, pottery, slate tools, sleds and certain types of ice-hunting gear. At pres-

ent, I am inclined to believe that the Ipiutak people settled the Arctic coast during a remote period and that early stages of Eskimo culture are, at least in part, derived from the culture of these early settlers.

There are some suggestions of a relation between Ipiutak culture and that of the sub-Arctic Eskimos (skulls with artificial eyes have been found on Kodiak Island and at Cook Inlet); the Aleutian Islands, and even the northwest coast (styles of carving and engraving, particularly the eye design, are vaguely similar); but these are not sufficiently numerous or detailed to be significant. A number of spirally carved objects in the collection resemble relief carvings done by the historic Ainu of northern Japan, the Goldi and Gilyak of the Amur River region[6] and relief designs on Neolithic pottery from Japan.

The exceptionally fine flint work of the Ipiutak people more closely resembles that of Neolithic cultures in northeastern Asia[7] than flint work of northern North America. Such suggestions of an eastern Asiatic origin for the Ipiutak people may be significant when it is remarked that centers of culture advance in eastern Asia lie closer to the Arctic coast of Alaska than do such centers in America, that Ipiutak implement types are atypical of those widely distributed in northern North America and that the sophisticated character of the culture implies an origin outside the American Arctic. The Ipiutak culture probably appears as an unexpected and isolated form in Alaska because of the lack of ancient material from northeastern Asia comparable to that on the American side of Bering Straits.

[1] The writer was accompanied by Magnus Marks. Funds were again supplied by the American Museum and the University of Alaska.

[2] These include toggle harpoon heads, harpoon foreshafts, harpoon socket pieces, snow goggles, salmon spear barbs, side prongs for bird spears, gull snares, blunt bird arrows, composite knife handles, flint flaker handles, chain links, mattock blades, boat skin stretchers and carved seal figures.

[3] These include whetstones, utilized and retouched flint flakes, end scrapers, certain forms of flint scrapers retouched from one surface, paint grinding stones, red ochre, pyrites, flint knife blades, needles, spoons, small bone tubes, pendants, caribou leg-bone scrapers, rodent tooth tools, awls, wedges, long barbed arrow or spear heads, adze blades and heads.

[4] Rainey, Froelich, "Eskimo Prehistory—the Okvik Site on the Punuk Islands," *Anthrop. Papers, Amer. Mus. of Nat. Hist.* **38**, Part 1 (in press).

[5] Collins, Henry B., Jr., "Archaeology of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska," *Smith. Misc. Coll.*, **96**, No. 1 (1937).

[6] Laufer, B., "The Decorative Art of the Amur River Tribes," *Mem. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, **7**, Pl. II (1902).

[7] Kurile Islands, Schnell, I., "Prehistoric Finds from the Island World of the Far East," The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, *Bull. No. 4, Stockholm*, Pl. XII (1932).

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